

Notes on High School Literature.

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A Note on the Style of "Lorna Doone."

When at the age of fourteen I first read "Lorna Doone" and delighted in it, I used to dwell with pleasure on the metrical passages. Particularly, there used to run through my head the lines at the end of the chapter called, "A Long Spring Month."

"All the beauty of the spring went for happy men to think of;

All the increase of the year was for other eyes to mark;"

Just as I was haunted by the ending of a chapter in "David Copperfield:"

"Never more, Oh God forgive you, Steerforth,
To touch that passive hand in love and friendship,
Never, never more."

In my recent re-reading of the book, I was surprised to find how often such metrical passages occur. But this time, they gave me annoyance instead of pleasure. After reading

(a) "With that chill and dread upon me
And the sheer rock all around;"

(b) "Though the cliffs were black above us
And the road unseen in front

And a great white grave of snow might at a single
word came down;"

(c) "For a brisk south wind arose
And the blessed rain came driving,"

the involuntary effort to scan every sentence in the paragraph became irksome, and I found that this intrusion of metrical form seriously interfered with my enjoyment of the passages of really beautiful prose in which Blackmore's work abounds.

It is to be regretted that the editor of "Lorna Doone" in "Macmillan's Pocket Classics" draws attention to this metrical writing as a merit. It is, on the other hand, condemned as a serious fault by most critics who speak with authority. For instance, Mr. Gissing, in his book on Dickens says, "The gravest of his faults, from 'Oliver Twist' onwards—and he never wholly overcame it—is the habit of writing metrically.

After naming some other writers who have fallen into this trick and quoting a metrical passage from Richard Jefferies he goes on to say, "This, of course, betrays an ear *untrained in the harmonies of prose.*"

This brings us to my object in drawing the attention of teachers of literature to this defect of Blackmore's prose. For I need hardly say that

mere fault finding has no place in studying a book. That object is to urge the necessity of distinguishing between "poetic prose" and "metrical prose" which are different things. That will be a step in training our ears in "the harmonies of prose."

The editor, in his introduction, does not make this distinction. He confuses the words "poetic" and "metrical." Now metre, (that is, "*recognized and expected bars*" as Mr. Theodore Watts puts it) is a part of poetry, but not all of it. Moreover, it is the part of poetry that is *distinctive*. That is, it belongs to poetry *alone*. Prose, like poetry, may appeal strongly to the imagination and to the feelings; it may use the same words that poetry would use. But the minute that metre is introduced, then it ceases to be good prose.

Illustration is easier than definition. Take Hamlet's speech:

"What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason!
How infinite in faculties! In form and moving how
express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In
apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world!
the paragon of animals!"

Or the speech of Elspeth of Craighurnfoot to Lord Glenallan:

"And now, heir of Glenallan, can you forgive me?"

"Ask forgiveness of God, and not of man," said the Earl, turning away.

"And how shall I ask of the pure and unstained what is denied me by a sinner like myself? If I hae sinned, hae I not suffered? Hae I had a day's peace or an hour's rest since those lang wet locks of hair first lay upon my pillow at Craighurnfoot? Has not my house been burned, wi' my bairn in the cradle? Have not my boats been wrecked, when a' others weathered the gale? Have not a' that were near and dear to me dree'd penance for my sin? Has not the fire had its share of them—the winds had their part—the sea had her part, and oh," she added, with a lengthened groan, "O that the earth would take her part that's been lang, lang wearying to be joined to it!"

These are examples of "poetic prose." But there is no hint of metre.

In "Lorna Doone," because of the author's intimate and impassioned love of nature, the nearest approach we get to this kind of writing is in descriptive passages. A collection might be made of those which may fairly be called "poetical" as distinguished from "metrical" in expression.

Study, for instance, the description of the October sunrise in the first seven paragraphs of chapter 33. There are only two very short passages in this description that are marred by metrical